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ABSTRACT

Whereas women carry the primary responsibility for food production in Africa, development agencies have devoted minimal resources to researching the impact of their policies and new techniques on the well-being of Africa's women farmers. C. K. Eicher (1995) and M. Smale (1995) call this the invisible factor because the gender-related constraints that cover women's productivity are seldom mentioned as explanation for Africa's food security problems. There is a need, therefore, to mobilize and empower women in Africa, and to remove the constraints by maximizing their productive capabilities in food production. In trying to change women's economic position and contribute to Africa's agricultural development, women face problems such as lack of education and failure to attain credit. This paper examines the barriers that African women face in their struggle to feed their families and the continent. It further paper discusses suggestions for overcoming these barriers and cites examples where these barriers have been relaxed. (Contains 16 references.) (BT)

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FOOD PRODUCTION IN AFRICA: THE IGNORED ROLE OF WOMEN

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Food Production in Africa: The Ignored Role of Women

Introduction

Women constitute a higher percentage of the population than men and their contribution to food production is higher than that of men. In Africa, women contribute 80 percent of total food production, they process it, store it, and serve it. Yet studies have shown that their role in agriculture has not been recognized. For example, access to the land in East Africa is only through a male relative. It can be rightly stated that many African women beg for land to produce food rather than own it. The specific situations may vary from country to country and within the country from one ethnic group to another. Whereas women carry the primary responsibility for food production in Africa, development agencies have devoted minimal resources to researching the impact of their policies and new techniques on the well being of Africa's women farmers. Eicher (1995) and Smale (1995) call this the "invisible factor" because the gender-related constraints that cover women's productivity are almost never mentioned as explanations for Africa's food security problems. There is need therefore, to

mobilize, empower women in Africa, and remove the constraints by maximizing their productive capabilities in food production. If food production growth rates are declining in Africa and food security is a problem in predominantly agricultural societies, then the solution is to target food producers who happen to be women.

In this paper barriers that face African women in their struggle to feed their families and the continent will be examined. Further, suggestions for overcoming these barriers will be discussed. Examples will be cited where these barriers have been relaxed.

Barriers that women face in food production

From the past decade to date, Africa is facing food crisis at an alarming rate. According to Bryson, (1981) the crisis is due to natural and man -made factors. In this era of world economic development, there is need for Africans to recognize their economy, especially by looking at the root cause of all this misery. Although some natural problems are beyond man's control, Africans should try to address the issue of food crisis involving every member of the community more fully. Studies by Gladwin, (1997), Smale (1995), Grieco, (1997) have shown that women's

roles in agriculture are not recognized. As such, the failure to involve and encourage women in agriculture is a negative practice that is denying Africa chances of economic self-sufficiency.

Women constitute the highest percentage of Africa's population and their rate of contribution to food production is higher than that of men's. Women are the majority of the world's food producers and contribute substantially to cash crop production. They make up 60-80 percent of agricultural workers in Africa and Asia, and more than 40 percent in Latin America. Evidence gathered from various countries show that women work longer hours than men, yet they must expect less returns (Monson and Kalb, 1985). It is frustrating to note that women are treated as a reserve labor force in agriculture, used during the peak periods, and laid off when conditions worsen. Adeyemo (1984) alluded to the fact that in Africa, the energy of women remains latent and unutilized and the potential of this sector of the population is not fully tapped. There can be no rural development as long as there is under-utilization of resources of women in agrarian societies. The role of women in development deserves special attention. That such resources have yet to be fully tapped derive largely from

inhibiting social traditions, customs, and practices with respect to the role of women.

For these reasons discussed above, Africa should heed to this call by recognizing and appreciating the role of women in agriculture, so that some of Africa's economic problems can be alleviated. Rural women in Africa are responsible for multiple, labor intensive and time consuming chores both inside and outside households. Women typically are responsible for food production and processing entails tasks such as threshing, drying, winnowing, peeling, grading, sieving, and pounding. Since these tasks are performed with traditional tools and techniques, they tend to become tedious and time consuming (Creevey, 1985). Despite this fact, food is distributed unequally, not only among countries and social classes, but within the family as well. In some traditional societies, men are served with food first while women and children get the leftovers. Women's nutritional needs are greatest because of their heavy work, childbearing, and breast- feeding, but they get less food and calories (Monsoon and Kalb, 1985).

Division of labor reflects differences in land types and crops that are grown by men and women. Africa, like other continents, is still suffering from sexist approaches (Dey, 1981;

Gladwin, 1997; Carr, 1997). There are certain types of crops that are farmed solely by men and others by women. For example, in Gambia, men cultivate sorghum, millet, maize, and groundnuts while women cultivate rice as subsistence crop. Studies have shown that if people were given freedom to decide the type of crops they would like to farm, they would contribute more to the family and agricultural development of their countries. This does not mean that women should not be advised but they should be given the freedom to decide. Those in authority are ignoring the primary role of women in food production and this is only contributing negatively to declining food production in Africa (Bryson, 1981).

The division of labor in Africa does not recognize the presence of unmarried women and widows in society who make great contributions in agriculture. Those who fall in this category are denied the opportunities of improving their families' economic position. Generally, women are expected to grow subsistence crops, gather fuel and rear children. In return, men provide cash crops for the family. For example, men in Tanzania own and farm palm trees and coconuts (Gladwin, 1997). The question is what about women heads of households? Are they not entitled to

economic advancement? It is important to note that this pattern of reciprocal obligations is often unequal in the sense that women's obligation is not compensated. Therefore, division of labor and farming crops has hindered production of crops and ignored a section of society.

According to Davison (1981) land, whether it is inherited, allotted, purchased or seized, is the basic resource of agricultural production. Women's relation to land, as conceptualized in Africa, is a critical factor in their ability to produce food for themselves and their families. At the same time, women increasingly have a need to generate income for commodities and services they cannot provide. Women's relation to land affects the political economy of their lives as producers-procreators. Hence, women's producers-procreators' roles influence their access to and use of land (Davison, 1988 and Creevey, 1986). Many African women in patriarchal societies acquire the right and the obligation to work their farms through descent and marriage system, and by virtue of their relation with men. The constraints and possibilities within which they work therefore, operate through the men's access to the use of land, rights of her brother, father or husband are all of great importance.

Colonial administration and technical advisers are largely responsible for the determination of the status of women in Africa. They have showed no sympathy for female farming system, which they found in many colonies. They shared opinion that men are superior to women in the art of farming. It then seems to follow that to develop agriculture, make farming ought to be promoted to replace female farming (Boserup, 1970). For instance, in Uganda it was women who began the cultivation of cotton, yet in 1923, the Europeans Director of Agriculture stated that women and old people could not grow cotton. They hired labor from neighboring countries. In those areas where women continued planting cotton, the European neglected to instruct female cultivators whenever they introduced new agricultural methods (Davison, 1988).

Today, women's resource bases are shrinking, while obligations grow, especially in regions where heavy out-migration of men leaves women as heads of households. Their access to land, agricultural input, and opportunities to participate in financial associated tasks often are further eroded. Programs of mechanization, commercialization, and social change are designed and implemented ignoring women's participation. Therefore, the process of introducing modern techniques, whether in agricultural

input, planting, harvesting technology, or storage and marketing, has not been gender-neutral.

In Burkina Faso, where development agencies have promoted animal traction, weeding, hoeing, and harvesting are still done by hand. Whereas previously a family cultivated an average of two hectares, with animal traction they will cultivate about five. It follows that women's work in the field has increased considerably, yet they did not take part in decision making. (Monsoon and Kalb, 1985).

In Tanzania, access to relevant technologies also tend to be a problem for women. Although Tanzania has vigorous food crop research programs, the majority of agricultural research is directed at cash crops which are controlled by men. Women who cultivate subsistence crops could use some of the cash crop technologies. For instance, women could easily use the ultra-low volume sprayer developed for use on control. Most cash crop inputs are however distributed through the cash crop authorities to growers. Hence women tend to be excluded (Mtoi, 1988).

Another burden on women is modernization of agriculture. The obvious changes are that through the course of the transition from traditional agriculture to modernized agriculture, women are

deprived of their productive functions, and the whole process of growth is retarded. For example, in Malawi, there was not a strict sexual division of labor, but when family farms were replaced by the plantation agricultural system, there were changes in the division of labor. Economic constraints have forced men to labor on the plantations for wages, leaving women with the increased burden of food production.

In most of Africa's rural regions, it is impossible for male project officers to work effectively with women. In many countries, cultural and religious constraints make it difficult for male agricultural extension officers to work with women directly. Cultural norms may prevent the development of effective working relationships between female and male agricultural extension workers. In some countries, if an extension agent wants to work with women, he must seek permission from their husbands and explain the purpose of the visit (Nuci, 1981). This causes the women to conclude that everything introduced in society is by men and for men. This explains why the government should train women to participate in agricultural projects.

The few women in agricultural extension services that work in Malawi have different roles from men. They generally work in a

separate women's division usually under the Home Economic Department. The areas the female extension officers are expected to address women farmers are primarily related to domestic work rather than food production. For example, building of mud-stoves, childcare and basket making. Whereas these are important areas as well, the main issue has not been addressed by women extension officers (Bryson, 1981). Bryson (1981) further agues that women are excluded from the projects because men fear that women would amass wealth and be able to run their own lives. On the other hand, where women have been actively involved, it has inspired other women to feel confident. For example, in Tanzania where women extension officers are involved in decision making along with men, extension projects to have been successful because they were sensitive to the needs of rural women.

It is important to note that women are interested in involvement with development projects but their problem in most cases is that they are not given a chance. An example from a Gambia rice project reveals that the project started by Taiwanese Agricultural mission and others excluded women from being involved in the project. Disillusionment resulted because women thought that the Taiwanese technician had come to improve

women's rice production. But instead of assisting women, they started a rice project with men (Dey, 1981). In most cases, it has been observed that projects excluding women do not succeed. Imposition of the development expert's conception of the household can seriously affect women's activities.

Researchers often focus on aspects of agriculture that affect cash crops and men's labor. For example, relatively little research has been done on women's crops such as millet, chickpeas, cassava and yams (Chambers, 1986). There has been less research on new cultivators that ease food processing and increase storage ability than on the new hybrids aiding in cash crop production. In addition, advanced technologies for weeding and harvesting women's crops have been slow to develop. In education and credit, women's ability to command technology and training is often constrained by forces over which they have little control. Yet they continue to do their best with what they have. Hopefully, clearer, more accurate analysis of their predicament will lead to programs that address issues such as lack of access to education and training (Monsoon and Kalb, 1985).

In trying to change their economic position and contribute to Africa's agricultural development, women face problems such

as lack of education and failure to attain credit. They lack opportunities to learn new technologies of production. The worst part is that those who work are paid low salaries. This does not enable them to acquire credit to purchase farm equipment. Agricultural services such as credit are only extended to individuals with title deeds, namely male heads of household.

Many women are excluded from training and other programs designed to benefit the owner or operator of small-scale farms. The exclusion of women deprives them of the means to generate income (Monsoon and Kalb, 1985). Women are thus marginalized economically and pushed into poverty. Despite this fact they make a substantial contribution to the local and national gross product.

In summary, women's participation in agriculture and economic development tends to be grossly underestimated in Africa. This is mostly due to conceptually and ideological biases regarding women's work. The economic contribution of women is essential for a continent like Africa at this stage of development. In order to ensure fuller integration of women's efforts into the agricultural economic development process, the barriers should be minimized or removed.

Steps already taken by countries to improve the role of women farmers

The gender gap in extension work is gradually being bridged. For example, in Ghana in 1988, the Women Farmers Extension Division was established to put emphasis on reaching Ghana's female farmers. Today, out of 3,000 extension workers, 500 are women. In Zimbabwe, some women are extension workers although the ratio is still small at present. Out of 2000 extension workers only120 are women (Colleen, 1990). Extension work will be reinforced since there are signs of official recognition. The new legal code gives women the right to own land and to be treated equally with men farmers. On the whole, women farmers have a long way to go before they can attain a level of true equality with men farmers. In Zimbabwe and Kenya, where land formerly owned by white settlers is being redistributed, women's groups have bought land under their own names and have obtained title deeds.

Beyond the right to own land, the right to obtain credit is equally important to a small-scale farmer. In Malawi, effort has been made for some credit programs to reach women. In Uganda, the Rural Farmers Scheme makes 50 percent of its loan available

to women. In Zimbabwe, the Agricultural Finance Corporation seeks to reach rural farmers, including women, and the only collateral required is a good knowledge of farming. In Malawi, such credits makes it possible for women who formerly had no access to credit to set up small enterprises such as raising cows, goats and poultry. In Senegal, women now can obtain loans and the only collateral needed is a recommendation from the elders (Colleen, 1990).

Credit facilities are being enhanced under cooperatives. For example, in Northern Ghana, where women customarily do not own land, members of the Tio-Nyorim women groups have pooled the plots their husbands gave them. This makes it more likely that a member will be able to continue farming even if she loses her husband.

Research institutions such as the Kenya Agricultural Institute (KARI) and the Kenya Forestry Research Institute have developed new trends in mainstreaming gender into research. Non-governmental organizations are now organizing workshops for women on farms. As trends lead towards sustainable agriculture, more emphasis must continue to be placed on food crop production and those who produce it. As it is now, a lot needs to be done.

How the barriers can be overcome

As stated earlier in this paper, the basic resources of agricultural production is land, therefore women's access to land is important. Governments should assist in the evolution of land tenure systems by providing legal and administrative mechanisms to ensure greater security to women. African land tenure rights that give the use of land owned by a close male relative are being eroded as population pressure makes land more valuable. Without land title or security tenure, women's access to credit has been limited as noted, thus making it harder to increase productivity. The key to success is to make the farm sector more productive through better policies that include women, establish stronger institutions, and provide quality education for women (Creevey, 1985).

Women should be encouraged to form women's groups or cooperatives as many countries are trying to do. These groups enable communities to get credit, acquire machinery, obtain needed inputs, sell their produce, etc. They are also a means of starting income generating activities, such as input to the cooperatives, which can repay them much more easily than individuals. Operating through the cooperatives also can mean a

more efficient use of scarce resources and can facilitate communication of information and training (Creevey, 1986). Cooperative organizations allow rural women to improve their produce in common. Through cooperatives, women can effectively defend their interests (Nuci, 1981).

Women and women's groups can make a major contribution to improving delivery of social services. In Africa, where generally women are managers within the household, they are responsible for health, farming, education, providing water, and above all feeding the family. Their role should be more explicitly recognized in the design and implementation of human resources development. By placing management responsibility for social services in local hands, it will make the programs more responsive to users, who in turn become more willing to contribute to their costs. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can act as valuable and cost-effective intermediaries between the central agencies and the community groups.

Rural women should be trained as extension workers for delivering information about appropriate technologies. It is clear that easing the task of gathering wood is a strong felt need in rural communities because of population increase, drought, and

deforestation. The need to reduce time and energy spent by women for gathering wood could be spent in activities that would improve food production. Therefore, the supply of fuel wood and technologies to reduce the amount needed concerns not only women, but also the whole of the village community and nation whose agricultural productivity has declined due to environmental degradation.

In agriculture and livestock keeping, the low cost production of ox-drawn ploughs and burrows, hand operated inter-row cultivators, planters and winnowers etc; all can save women time and energy. For example, improved farm stores could ensure those new varieties and technologies recommended largely correspond to their needs and constraints. Women representation in the field currently, is twenty percent in Africa, should be brought closer to Asia's fifty percent. Other ways in which women's time can be saved is by building water catchments tanks; if used in rural areas they can save time involved in carrying water from great distances (Monsoon and Kalb, 1985).

Recommendations

1. In order to be food secure, women must have multiple livelihood strategies.
2. Women are responsible for reproductive tasks within the household as well as food production. In this regard, policy makers should examine closely labor implementations of recommended technology packages, including those aimed at replenishing Africa's depleted soils.
3. Cash and food crop production by African women farmers must be viewed as interdependent to the extent that it is impossible to separate them. Moreover, intensification of food production by women farmers will require them to grow cash crop as well.
4. More emphasis should be placed on empowering women farmers and provide them with good access to reasonably operating markets, which in turn will increase women's income-earning options and improve their food security.
5. Research institutions should mainstream gender into research, which in the long run will improve sustainable food production.
6. Projects that target rural women are likely to be more successful if they seek to address both women's productive and reproductive roles and needs.

Conclusion

Food production has been, and continues to be, the responsibility of African women. Social relations shape people's economic relation to land. Economic relation of production includes the division of production and reproduction (Davison,

1988). The issue of land, women's role agriculture production, and women's reproductive role are perceived differently by societies, and this affects women's productive potential (Mtoi, 1988).

There are opportunities to assist and support women's attempts to gain some control over the circumstances of their lives which both governments and donor agents should seize. The situation is extraordinarily complex and no simple policy initiatives can be reasonably suggested, in part because our knowledge of women's policies is limited. However, it is reasonable to assume that policy changes can safely be directed towards access to and control over factors of production, which include land, capital, and farm input. It is through these factors that food production can be increased.

The continual increase in food shortages and malnutrition in Africa, combined with global awareness of women's critical contribution to society have led to the development of alternative strategies assisting in female farmers access to training, credit, and participation in farmers' programs. Decision-makers now have to plan and implement these strategies. Resourcing African women for participation in agricultural decision- making and leadership in Africa is a step that must be taken by scholars and development

professionals. The author believes that empowering women farmers will enhance food production techniques.

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